

# Latin American Folk Art Puppets

**GRADE LEVEL:** High School

**SUBJECT:** Visual Arts, Social Studies, Theatre

**MEDIA:** Sculpture

**FEATURED ARTWORK:**



*Puppets*, Mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mexico, Papier-mâché, cotton, straw, paint, wood, San Antonio Museum of Art, Gift of Peter P. Cecere, 2006.1.121-126.128

## OBJECTIVE:

Students will investigate the history of puppet making, comparing and contrasting Spanish puppet making and Mexican puppet making. They will then make a papier-mâché hand puppet of a pop culture icon.

## DISCUSSION:

Many cultures use puppetry to entertain and reflect on religious and subjects or in secular storytelling. In Spain, puppetry was used to teach moral values. Puppetry commonly used religious stories to remind Catholic audiences to be faithful and live a moral life. After the Spanish conquest of Mexico, arts of Spain and Europe influenced the indigenous art. Artists in Latin America began to create puppets to tell the story of Christianity. These puppets from the San Antonio Museum of Art may have been used for this purpose.

Indigenous artists combined Spanish methods and symbols with their own. Later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mexican artisans began making hand puppets of popular culture personas, such as famous performers, heroes, circus characters and many of the traditional characters associated with purely Mexican dramas, such as the young woman dressed in traditional dress (*China Poblana*) and the Aztec jaguar (*guerreros aztecas*). Hand puppets, like these from the San Antonio Museum of Art's collection, were made from a variety of materials. The head and hands of the puppets were often made of wood while the body and other details were made of leather, cloth and glass. These artisans also began using papier-mâché to create the heads of the puppets, since it is a lighter and easier material to mass produce.

Today, puppets made by Mexican artisans can be found in the public *mercados* (markets) all over Mexico. Puppet theater is still performed during seasonal carnivals. Masked dance dramas, nativity scenes and

tableaux, Holy Week processions, historical recreations and many other important dramas are acted out annually to keep religious, moral and nationalistic ideas alive.

## **MATERIALS:**

- Small balloons
- Art paste (this must be mixed at least two hours before using)
- Several 1" wide strips of newspaper for each artist
- Buckets
- A variety of colors of cloth/felt
- Needles
- Thread
- Scissors
- Yarn
- Cardboard
- White primer/gesso
- Acrylic paints
- Paint brushes
- Glue
- Optional: Glitter, sequins and any other materials to decorate/dress up the puppets

## **PROCESS:**

1. Discuss how current Mexican and Spanish artisans create puppets of people from popular culture.
  - What is popular culture? It consists of current trends, fads and events that are happening today in our own culture.
  - What is an icon? An icon is a celebrity, character or object that is seen in current culture and reflects a given society or era.
  - Have students list some pop culture icons from our culture or community.
2. Students can choose a pop culture character for their puppet and draw what it will look like. Remind students that they are creating a hand puppet. Have them trace around their hand and then draw the head at the top of the traced fingers. Next they can add other details onto the traced hand.
3. Once the drawing is complete, have the students blow up a balloon to the size of an orange, tying the opening securely.
4. Form a cylinder out of a 2 x 6" strip of cardboard, taping the ends to keep its shape. Then tape the cylinder to the end of the balloon, where it is tied. Add three pieces of tape, evenly placed around, so that the tape leaves no space between the cylinder and the balloon.
5. Students can begin the papier-mâché process on the balloon by dipping one strip of 1" newspaper at a time into the prepared art paste (use two fingers to squeegee off the excess paste). This will be the head of puppet.
  - Cover the balloon with the following pattern: One vertical, one horizontal, one vertical, one horizontal.
  - Make sure that each strip is smoothed over the other strip.
  - The balloon should be covered completely, at least three times, to create a strong cover.
6. Details such as the nose, lips, ears and eyes can now be added on with papier-mâché.
  - Students can use pieces of newspaper that have been dipped in the art paste to shape the details by rolling, squeezing or bunching up the wet newspaper.
  - These shapes are then placed on the head form and covered with small strips of wet paste paper to hold the details down.
  - Each attachment must be completely covered with small strips in a woven type pattern, otherwise the attachment will come off when it dries.

7. Let the head form dry for two days. Placing a fan to blow on the forms can help them dry faster.
8. While the head form dries, students can begin constructing the body or outfit for the puppet. Make a t-shape cutout from the cloth, approximately 12 x 12." Measure the circumference of the neck, add 2" for the neck opening and mark where the neck will be attached.
9. Students can hand stitch or use a sewing machine to sew on their own, or the teacher can prepare the cloth bodies beforehand. If students sew the cloth bodies on their own, allow one or two extra days for completion. Remember to leave an opening for the neck and at the bottom portion for the hand.
10. Once the head forms are dry, students will prime them with white primer or gesso, in order to cover all of the ink of the newspaper.
11. When the primer is dry, students can begin painting their character.
12. After the paint is dry, they can glue yarn for hair or add other details like rhinestones, glitter, straw, etc.
13. Then have students add details to the cloth body (i.e. painted patterns, sequins, tails, felt hands, etc.). When this is complete, students can attach the neck to the body with glue.

### **Extension:**

- Students can work in groups to create and perform a puppet play. Have them think about the interactions of each character.

### **TEKS:**

#### **Art, Level I:**

(2) Creative expression/performance. The student expresses ideas through original artworks, using a variety of media with appropriate skill. The student is expected to (A) create visual solutions by elaborating on direct observation, experiences and imagination (C) demonstrate effective use of art media and tools. (3) Historical/cultural heritage. The student demonstrates an understanding of art history and culture as records of human achievement. (A) compare and contrast historical and contemporary styles, and identifying general themes and trends (B) describe general characteristics in artworks from a variety of cultures.

#### **Social Studies:**

(26) Culture. The student understands the relationship between the arts and the times during which they were created. The student is expected to: (A) identify significant examples of art and architecture that demonstrate an artistic ideal or visual principle from selected cultures; (B) analyze examples of how art, architecture, literature, music, and drama reflect the history of the cultures in which they are produced; and (C) identify examples of art, music, and literature that transcend the cultures in which they were created and convey universal themes.

#### **Theatre, Level I:**

(1) Four basic strands--perception, creative expression/performance, historical and cultural heritage, and critical evaluation--provide broad, unifying structures for organizing knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire. Through perceptual studies, students increase their understanding of self and others and develop clear ideas about the world. Through a variety of theatrical experiences, students communicate in a dramatic form, make artistic choices, solve problems, build positive self-concepts, and relate interpersonally. (2) Students increase their understanding of heritage and traditions through historical and cultural studies in theatre. Student response and evaluation promote thinking and further discriminating judgment, developing students who are appreciative and evaluative consumers of live theatre, film, television, and other technologies.

Lessons are written by area educators and the San Antonio Museum of Art Education department. If you are interested in sharing your lesson ideas featuring works of art from the museum's collections with the San Antonio Museum of Art Education department, please email [education@samuseum.org](mailto:education@samuseum.org).